

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

22nd CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 5, 2003

HINCHEY VOWS TO RECLAIM AIRWAVES FOR PUBLIC

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (NY-22) today vowed to pursue legislative remedies to reverse this week's decision by Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to weaken the rules governing media ownership. In addition to supporting legislation that would reverse the FCC's decision, Hinchey said he would be introducing a bill to re-establish the public's control of its airwaves, which has been eroded since 1987.

Speaking at a press conference, Hinchey made the following remarks:

"The FCC has abandoned its responsibility to protect the public interest. Starting with the Reagan Administration's elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and culminating with the establishment this week of the Powell Rules, big media corporations and their allies have succeeded in gradually pushing aside the public interest in favor of big profits. There is clearly a great deal of support for reversing the decision made by Chairman Powell and his two Republican colleagues. That's a vital step. To fully restore the right of the public to have a say in the information and entertainment it has access to, we need to undo all the previous damage that's been done over the last several years.

"Since the early 20th century, Congress has recognized that the airwaves belong to the public and that those who use them have a responsibility to serve the public interest. The FCC was created in 1934 to protect the public's airwaves and to promote the 'widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources.' In 1945 the Supreme Court declared that this dissemination is essential to the welfare of the public and that a free press is a condition of a free society.

"Over the years, the rules put in place to protect the public interest have been weakened. The process began in earnest during the presidency of Ronald Reagan when his handpicked FCC chairman successfully fought to eliminate the Fairness Doctrine, which required that a broadcaster give equal time to opposing points of view. In the 1996 Telecommunications Act, Congress eliminated the national radio ownership caps and increased the national TV ownership limit. It also instituted the current process by which the FCC must justify the necessity of its media ownership rules every two years.

-more-

"Today, three companies own half the radio stations in America. Two-thirds of America's independent newspapers have disappeared since 1975 and nearly three-quarters of the country's media markets have only one local daily newspaper. One-third of the nation's independent TV stations have vanished.

"The result is that local news coverage is neglected, political opinion is censored and entertainment is degraded. Even popular musicians are banned from broadcast if they express political opinions that the media magnates dislike.

"The public airwaves belong to the public, not the media elites. In the past, broadcasters had to show that their programming was serving the public interest when they applied for renewal of their license every eight years. But now the FCC has made these renewals virtually automatic."

Hinchey, one of only 16 members of the House to vote against the Telecommunications Act of 1996, has continued to actively oppose any further erosion of media ownership rules. On February 3 he sent a letter to FCC Chairman Michael Powell, expressing serious concerns about the commission's planned rule changes. The letter was signed by 30 members of Congress. Hinchey subsequently introduced House Resolution 218, which urged the FCC not to revise its media ownership rules without extensive review and public scrutiny. The resolution had 135 cosponsors.

Despite overwhelming opposition from the public and a diverse array of organizations, the FCC commissioners voted along party lines to increase the number of TV stations one company can own as well as the percentage of U.S. households a company can reach. It also weakened the rules that prevent companies from controlling different forms of media in the same market. Under the new rules, a national television network may now acquire dozens of local broadcaster stations and control up to 90 percent of the national television market. A single corporation may now acquire in one city up to three television stations, eight radio stations, the cable television system, numerous cable television stations and the only daily newspaper.

The Reclaiming the Public's Airwaves Act, which Hinchey is currently drafting, would:

- restore the Fairness Doctrine, requiring broadcast licensees to provide a reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public importance,
- prevent one company from owning broadcast stations that reach more than 35% of U.S. TV households,
- repeal the "UHF discount", an outdated formula now used as a loophole to avoid the national TV ownership limit,
- restore a national radio ownership cap and strengthen local radio ownership caps,
- re-establish the rules weakened by the FCC this week,
- provide tax incentives to encourage broadcast ownership diversification,
- rescind the biennial review process through which the recent FCC decision was reached, and
- direct the FCC to strengthen rules requiring broadcast licensees to serve the public interest.